

**Education Committee
Wednesday, March 15, 2023**

House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Kathryn Szeligowski and I am a resident of Groton. I work as a paraeducator in the Groton School District in the Thames River Environmental and Marine Science Magnet School. I offer the following testimony in support of HB 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators

Paraeducators are on the front lines of student learning. We provide one-on-one assistance to special education students, reinforce instruction, manage classrooms and support English language learners. We celebrate with our students when they succeed and try to redirect them when they act out verbally and physically. Despite the important roles we play, paraeducators are among the lowest paid staff members in our schools. We can't afford our healthcare and there is little chance we can afford to retire with dignity - unless we work a second or third job. We don't get paid during the summer and we can't collect unemployment. There is no wonder paraeducators are leaving the profession in droves, leaving more than 1,300 paraeducator positions vacant in districts throughout the state. HB 6881 is an important step in improving the work life and career opportunities of Connecticut's paraeducators. But most of all this bill is an opportunity to begin to treat paraeducators with the respect and dignity we have earned.

I love my job, my coworkers, and the students I work with so dearly. I've seen the students grow and change so much since the beginning of the year. As paras, we attend recess, nurse visits, field trips, lunches, and other activities that most other staff don't have the time to be there for. We often act as an ear and support staff to students we're not assigned to. Most kids see us as a middle ground between their teachers and other administrators... I feel the students trust paras in a different way they do with other staff.

I work full-time, have a degree, and still don't make a living wage. I worry about personal expenses daily. Healthcare emergencies especially worry me, since I'm already working with a pre-existing condition like so many others in my field. I hope that if this bill passes, our status and title in the educational field is given more tangible respect and appreciation. I often wonder about the long term consequences of working this job, both physically and financially, and what it would mean for my future given the efforts I've already made to be here. I love being a paraprofessional, and have wanted to work in elementary schools since I was a child. The effect we have on children is incalculable, and we deserve more as workers.

Now is the time for this committee and all the members of the General Assembly to take immediate and meaningful action to raise paraeducator pay, lower our healthcare costs, ensure we have meaningful retirement benefits and give us the tools we need to help students succeed.

I want to thank you for hearing my testimony. I urge the members of the committee to support House Bill 6881.

Kathryn Szeligowski
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